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ABSTRACT

Latvia, formerly a Soviet state, has been attempting to create an independent democratic country since the late 1980s. This paper describes the history of Latvia's political culture in relation to the country's democratization, particularly in its schools over the last decade. Although many Latvian institutions have been slow to change, visible democratic developments have taken place in the classroom between teachers and students. The change has come mainly as an expansion in teachers' and students' freedom to make their own decisions. Prescriptions for Latvian teachers to continue the growth of their students' democratic citizenship include introducing new democracy education subject materials, teaching methods, and hands-on teacher training beginning with the primary level for teachers of all disciplines. (CB)

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Political Culture in Latvian Schools: Preparation for Democratic Citizenship

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POLITICAL CULTURE IN LATVIAN SCHOOLS: PREPARATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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I would like to start with definition of subject, at least in my understanding, which I will address in this particular presentation.

When I started to think about this topic I realized that probably there were no research or any surveys or publications, addressing this theme in aspect of politics in Latvia. Usually educators, researchers and general public understand politics and political culture as areas, situated somewhere very far from school life and classroom activities especially.

If we look in dictionaries the politics traditionally is determined as "the art or science of government", but there is no consensus, and never been, which activities should be count as government. Is government confined to state? Does it not also take place in church, guild, estate, family and school?
There is considerable disagreement on which aspects of social life are to be considered as "political". One extreme might be that any inter-personal relationship is political, even between men and women, other - it applies just to state government and parties.
A modern mainstream view might be: politics applies only to those human beings which can communicate symbolically and thus make statements, invoke principles, argue and disagree. Politics occurs where people disagree about distribution of reasons and have some procedures for the resolution of such disagreements.
(1)

So, according this possible definition I would like to characterize the main disagreements , distributions of reasons, and procedures of decision making and the attitudes, beliefs and values which rise from and determine them, in school life in Latvia, and to draw some developments in these areas in last 10 years.

I have to say, that this material is based mainly on my own experiences, observations and press materials, not on some specific survey and that's why I missed the long list of academic references at the end if this paper. Otherwise, since this was ought to be

practitioners comment I don't feel sorry very much about it. And, of course, its also might be a my subjective political point of view about this topic itself.

I m working as a secondary school teacher in Riga secondary school - named Natalijas Draudzinas Gymnasium since 1986. I used to work in grades 6,7,8,9,10,11,12. Also last two Years I m working as part time expert for Center for Curriculum Development and Examination of Ministry of Education and Science. My subject areas were History, Social Studies, Law and Government, Politics, Economy, Philosophy. Since working in DAC, I am deeply involved in in-service training and Civic education project generally, so in the last 3 years I visited many schools in country with a specific interest on civics and democratic development. This gives me at least possibility considerably describe, if not evaluate, the situation in schools in my country.

First of all I would like to give You some basic information about Latvia. It is not because I don't have very much to say about topic itself, but because without that it would be hard to understand the specific characteristics of political culture there.

There are few different aspects or areas of experience in peoples lives which affect and determine the political culture in Latvia.

The first should be thought in historically/political perspective.

As one of the Baltic countries Latvia joined the same historical experience during last hundred years like Lithuania and Estonia did. Sharing the similar cultural heritage, mentality, values with peoples of Northern Europe, in difference from them, Latvians didn't had many chances to determine themselves politically. Just few times in last century Latvian people acted as a political nation in full sense of meaning - in revolution activities in 1905, in the period of Freedom fights in 1918 - 1920. (2) Then the period of first Independent Republic in 20 - 30 ies unfortunately was poisoned by *coupe detat* of 1934 and following authoritarian regime. The Soviet occupation in 1940, and World War II interrupt even the development of independent state and last 50 years people in Latvia experienced the rule of Soviet totalitarian regime. So, there was just short -14 years period of parliamentary democracy in Latvia, which left generally a common dissatisfaction with that in peoples minds afterwards. (3)
The national awakening movement in late 1980 ies was really grassroots movement in Latvia which brought peoples for a couple of years in political activeness and created the democratic

institutions which we use now, but the political culture doesn't change so quickly.

These experiences affect of course a political culture of nation very much. The political apathy, passivity and cynicism about politics and politicians became a essential characteristics of society political culture. Actually, the political passivity could be considered as a specific strategy of survival, developed during centuries under different powers.
In same time Latvians kept very strong communitarian sense , but , because of these circumstances, mostly based on ethnic factor than others, and rather opposite to the each government of this country.
If I may very briefly underline the main traditional typical views, believes on politics they should be as follows:
- politics are something which the elite/rulers deal with and for usual people its always better to stay away;
- from other side - politics and government and law are seen as rather normative than positive phenomenon, - as something which should be carried out in some right way by knowledged, professional people;
- the task of politics is to provide safety and welfare for people, who don't have to care about it.
Generally speaking the common understanding could be concentrated into old famous folk saying: " ...governments come and go, nation and country stay...".
Because of this, mentioned above, the active participation in politics by Latvians always was evaluated more negatively, as attempt "to jump over the head" - became a member of "nobility" which in most of times was ethnically foreign - German, Swedish, Polish, Russian.
Even if we talk about negative political activity - like resistance movements against ruling foreign power - it was not supported very much, because of practical reasons - if we cannot expect to win anyway, lets better not emerge the existence of nation by open resistance and fight.
From other side - in the first moment of possibility to really change the situation and took a political power in their hands, the Latvians, as well Lithuanians and Estonians demonstrated high level of organization and activity in late 1980 ies, fighting for reconstruction of independence of our countries. The teachers naturally were brought into this sudden liberalization and became as frontiers in political fight, and actually many took active part. But, even if the slogans in that time were about freedom and democracy, I would like to say that the peoples expectations were mostly about national independent state and economical welfare. The active political participation was mostly understood not as never-ending process -

essential part of citizenship , but as a short term activity, leading to creation a "right government" instead of former "wrong one".

The other aspect which affect political culture would be ethnic or national diversity of Latvian society.

There are different ethnic and national groups in Latvian society today. Around 55 % of overall population are ethnic Latvians, 35 % - ethnic Russians, others - Lithuanians, Byelorussians, Poles, Jews. The 75% of all country inhabitants are Latvian citizens, about 25% - non citizens. (4)
This reflects also into school system. According the Law of Education, and previous tradition, the ethnic minorities have a rights that state should provide basic education in their languages. This creates a different language of instruction schools. Lets give me brief statistics.
In 1994, for example, there were
451 Latvian language primary schools
63 Russian language primary schools
75 others secondary schools
186 Latvian language secondary schools
126 Russian language secondary schools
57 others sec. schools
Overall the country about 66% of all students are educated now in Latvian language. Others - mainly in Russian. (5)

The political culture differs mostly between citizens and non-citizens, which is determined by less participatory rights in government (they cannot vote). Also generally the non citizens (which mostly are ethnic Russians) demonstrated the greater lack of interest about politics than citizens, who at least care about nation state. The most of them accept and tolerate with Latvian state, but don't identify with it. As well there are small but more extreme movements inside non citizen community. Part of non citizens who want to be naturalized are learning constitution, language and are probably more active and interested than citizens are. The other group - so called "interfront activists" who still identify themselves with Soviet, show negative activity - mostly demonstrating against the state and laws, but they are also more active than usual citizens - ethnic Latvians. The tensions between these groups also influenced the political culture - since the ethnic relations is weak point of politics which frustrates people they tend not to speak about it publicly. So the experience of opened discussion about the serious problems is extremely small. People are not able tolerate with opposite views, argue without conflict, and, being moderate, that's why better they choose to keep silent. The common habit is

not to speak about politics in a party, family meetings, and even with foreign people whose political views You don't know. Latvians generally don't like opened confrontation in any aspect, and since its differs from other ethnic groups, it should be part of cultural mentality. The important illustration to this is a regular differences between public opinion pulls and results of closed ballots in Baltic countries. People very often act anonymously complete different comparatively to their opinions they showed openly before that.

The third aspect would be particular pedagogical one.

Traditionally the educational system was strongly knowledge based and indoctrinate oriented. This demands keeping a strong order and regulations in education process.
From other side the passive political resistance like in society in general, reflects into schools also, in some kind of "double morality" in relations between students and teachers. The order, ritualized official agenda of school life (celebrations etc.) , even wearing of uniforms mostly were used as a form, just for outside look. Many times teachers and students used different "language" in classroom and outside school, and students from the very early age learned to "speak correct" in cases when teacher expect that. So the education really was a school of "false authoritarianism" or "double morality".

So, all this above mentioned forming a political culture which could be defined as comunitarian authoritarian. Lets say that average Latvian citizen would like to live in independent national state, safe, ruled by law, where government will provide full social and health security, give full economical freedom in same time offering new jobs and higher wages. The rights to vote are important, but not so much as right to criticize. Participation should be minimal - just in elections, and politicians must be clever, nice, correct , with authority, they must govern in right way. The necessity to think, discuss, choose between and share responsibility, to know the laws, lobby, demonstrate etc. makes this citizen generally angry. The same is true about non citizens, except question of nation state, in which they are more indifferent.

All these basic aspects of political culture influences directly the political culture in schools now.

I would like to stress my attention to such main aspects of political culture in schools such as ;

- school administration, and relationship between administrators, teachers and students and their parents,
- relationship in classroom,
- relations between students.

The school administration was and still remain to be very centralized and authoritarian. In the last years of democratization, the school organization doesn't change very much. This is paradoxically, that there are probably the same democratic institutions and rights like they were in soviet era - like Pedagogical council consisting of administrations and teachers, and Parents councils, but the activity and practical usage of them by teachers, parents and students are even less. There used to be also Student councils in many schools but in most cases they died naturally in beginning of 1990 ies. It could be explained, that first, former time activities mostly were organized - people were obliged to participate even actually they were indifferent. After the short period of great activity in 1989 - 1991, when for example as some democratic extreme the principals elections were organized and teachers strike often, their interest failed down and now there are no more sources to rise it. So, generally the more power concentrated in hands of school principals, which are appointed by Ministry of Education and responsible to it. Also, according the new labor law, they have more rights to fire teachers, so their dependence from relations with principle or even more important - administrators, keeping in mind growing unemployment and low income, is very great. In this situation, many teachers mostly feel unsafe, they try to keep good relations and keep their mouth closed if possible. The inside censorship always works most effective. The competition between teachers become stronger. There were a cases few years ago then some teachers were fired, as they supposed - unjustically. The cases went to court , but school administrations win. So after that, there were no more such attempts. It illustrates the current situation when teachers mostly care about preserving their job, not about rights and decision making.
The same process going on concerning the parents. There are growing distance between good schools and bad ones. In situation when the demand for good education is higher than supply of it, parents are interested to get their children into the good schools, so they tried it in all ways. Many schools offering competition for students to get in, and in many cases there are real corruption - parents tend to pay for acceptance of their kids into schools sometimes. So there are no question about parent pressure on principals - they are interested on their good attention. From other side, there are growing pressure from both administration and parents on teacher, because all they wants higher level of teaching.

As for bad schools, the parents anyway don't have a chance to send their kids to other school, and then they usually doesn't care about it.
The control from Ministry as well is very weak, because the shortage of official staff, lack of funds and unprestigious of administrators and principles work. So the policy is very liberal, and practically, many things depends completely from principals.

So, paradoxically, I have to conclude that in this aspect of school administration, the democratization after some euphoria some years ago, step back quite seriously, and powers of school administrators are greater and uncontrolled than any other times.

The classroom probably is the place, were most of developments happened, if we compare it with period of ten years ago. There are definitely much more freedom in classroom atmosphere. Students don't wear uniforms from 1988. Teachers don't control anymore the outlook of students, behavior in class and break times. Nevertheless, there are some serious tensions, which Id like to address.
Since breaking the old system, teachers are confused about their role in classroom. The authoritarian style of keeping order and discipline is ought to be denied, at least this is not politically correct anymore. Instead teachers trying act liberal, but without skills and knowledge how to organize a classroom in democratic, interactive manner it often leads to conflicts between teachers and students or to just sort of anarchy. Many students, experiencing oppression in first grades, enjoy the freedom and liberty now, expressing all kinds of their behavior in extreme manner. Like destroying the lesson by speaking, walking out and in, laughing, demonstrating indifference to the lesson and teacher. The natural activity expresses usually in asocial way, if teachers don't know how to put it into some democratic routes. So the teachers usually pick one of strategies - trying to overcome students to oppress them, providing discipline, or just gave up - letting students be their own. Keeping strong discipline may be claimed as authoritarianism. Both strategies creates serious problems and dissatisfaction from both sides.
Inside the student groups there are growing movement towards sub grouping and individualism. The old communitarian sense of class as a social unit is destroyed by growing possibility to choose subjects and individual curriculum, by growing individual responsibility for each own results, by competition, and less control. Also there are very serious and still growing distinguishes between more wellfared and poor students, actually between families they come from, between interest groups, which lead to more separated and stratified structure of student societies. The former organized outside school events like excursions, meetings,

summer camps etc. are stopped because of lack of money. So all activities are very individual or group based. Such old traditions like class voting for particular common issues which were very often even in Soviet time and period of awakening, is no more the case. One reason - there are no more issues about what to vote (like public goods - spending of common sources).
From other side there are also positive tendencies, I have to remark. One of them is slowly growing sense of responsibility about education what they receive, between students. They care more about level of teaching, especially in best schools. And sometimes students are able to demonstrate good cooperation to achieve particular goals and defend their interests. For example, there are cases in past years when students made a petitions, lobby and get a permission to change a teacher, which didn't provide the needs of students according their mind. In old times, if some teacher would be really bad in secondary school, missing the lessons, letting students be their own, not giving tasks, the students probably would be happy about that. It is not case anymore.
But generally speaking students still are passive participants, if are at all, or basically recipients of information in classroom. Also teachers still tend to be a final instance and play their role as instructors. The equal discussion between students and teachers still is very unusual in school practice, which is determined mostly culturally. The situations when teacher and student both will be right or stayed on their own opinions and disagree on something will be considered as something out of order and will frustrate both of them or even lead to a conflict.

I have to admit a phenomenon, that the other ethnic group schools students usually are more free and active in participatory action, then ethnic Latvians are. This is showed by some surveys and many observations, mostly by teachers working in different language schools and having chance to compare. Usually the students there more often interrupt the lesson, rise spontaneous questions, discuss controversial issues, and speak upon teacher than in Latvian language schools. But, in difference from Latvian, in minority schools the weakest topics are questions about national identity, Latvian state and their role in this country. This theme generally is considered as "politically incorrect" and teachers try usually not touch this topic, at least in open classroom discussion. In Latvian classroom in comparison, this theme should be one of the dominants.
This is strong feeling that the minority schools teachers and administrators generally tried to demonstrate loyalty toward government more than Latvians, but this again would be linked with experiences of "double morality".

The explanation could be based on fact that in Russian language schools students mostly came from families with different social and political behavior experience than Latvians have.

Let me approach now the question about the education for democratic citizenship.
In the situation described above, there is clear it is not to be easy introduce such education just by changing textbooks and programs. Since the 1990, the few groups of activists started their programs on Civic education and there were few different approaches to that. One was traditionally based on Civic knowledge as the main component of any education. So, the new curricula and kind of textbook for secondary level were developed very quickly but they differs from old Soviet examples just by replacing the Latvian Soviet constitution, symbols of government, and laws which students should learn ,by the new ones - of Republic of Latvia. There were no problems to introduce such materials into schools, teachers accepted them naturally, because they were actually the same. By some educators it was used as argument - we cannot apply to western experience of active learning because our teachers and political culture here are different. And some still continue to argue this way. I disagree with that very strictly, because then it is not actually education for democratic citizenship.
The approach of the program of Democracy Advancement Center was based on three main strategies -
First, the content should be changed stressing more attention to everyday life of students - family, street, school, social groups and democratic interaction of people. It should be even more important here than in Western countries, were students experienced democracy naturally in micro level. This is clear than there will be no democratic government if the society itself will not be democratic.
Secondly, the crucially important is to change radically the method of teaching from instructional to interactive, participatory. This is the hardest task of course. In our situation, we used some tactical methods to solve this:
1. To introduce completely new subject instead of reforming old one. This let teachers left behind some stereotypes and presumptions about subject.
2. To provide teachers first of all with methodical materials, not with textbooks, which not let them work in old way, at least makes very uneasy;
3. Simultaneously organize lot of short introductory seminars using role play - putting teachers in place of students and demonstrating lessons. There is much better to show the lesson than talk about democracy. Our experience shows that teachers much better accept

and use new methods when they are 'demonstrated then just received on paper.
4. They can be all subject areas teachers, usually they are much better than History teachers.
5. By content, the small group work, decision making and discussion skills development are the most stressing activities which shall be trained first of all.
And, which is also important, we started to introduce these reforms in primary school first, not in secondary. (6)

There are also the third approach to education for democratic citizenship in Latvia. This is approach called "...building a democratic school". This involves creature of Student parliaments, involvement of students and parents in decision making, and reforming the whole process of teaching in schools , like cooperative teaching, teachers counseling, multidisciplinar approach, learn-to-learn strategies, project works. But these processes mostly happened just in few places, mostly private schools, which are already organized from beginning with quite clear new ideology.
Of course, combining of all these strategies will provide the continuing process of reforms, which I think, will never end. We looking forward, and I think it could be possible after some maybe 5 years in some next similar conference to report about some consequences of these reforms to peoples behavior and political culture. Not yet.

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